

Towards Simulated Morality Systems: Role-Playing Games as Artificial Societies

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Abstract: Computer role-playing games (RPGs) often include a simulated morality system as a core design element. Games' morality systems can include both god's eye view aspects, in which certain actions are inherently judged by the simulated world to be good or evil, as well as social simulations, in which non-player characters (NPCs) react to judgments of the player's and each others' activities. Games with a larger amount of social simulation have clear affinities to multi-agent systems (MAS) research on artificial societies. They differ in a number of key respects, however, due to a mixture of pragmatic game-design considerations and their typically strong embeddedness in narrative arcs, resulting in many important aspects of moral systems being represented using explicitly scripted scenarios rather than through agent-based simulations. In this position paper, we argue that these similarities and differences make RPGs a promising challenge domain for MAS research, highlighting features such as moral dilemmas situated in more organic settings than seen in game-theoretic models of social dilemmas, and heterogeneous representations of morality that use both moral calculus systems and social simulation. We illustrate some possible approaches using a case study of the morality systems in the game *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

1 INTRODUCTION

Role-playing games (RPGs) are a genre of videogame in which the player takes on the role of a character or group of characters and plays out a story in a virtual world. The story often takes the form of a series of quests intermixed with more free-form exploration; the virtual world is typically populated by a number of computer-controlled characters referred to as non-player characters (NPCs).¹

A common and often prominent feature of RPG design is the presence of a *morality system* of some kind. These vary greatly in how they represent morality computationally, but in keeping with the high-fantasy setting of many RPGs, often position characters on a good vs. evil scale. Common features include: updating characters' morality as a result of actions in the game world (killing someone innocent

makes you more evil); modifying gameplay based on moral alignment (an evil character is shunned or reacted to in a hostile manner); and modifying narrative based on moral alignment (different choices result in different endings). In some games this can have an added layer of simulated social complexity, with different groups of NPCs or even individual NPCs making their own moral judgments, instead of characters falling on a universal good/evil alignment.

In addition to forming a core part of the game mechanics of many RPGs, these representations of morality can be used to pose dilemmas in which the player must choose a course of action (Zagal, 2009; Sicart, 2013). Such dilemmas can be analyzed from both an "internal ludic" perspective, i.e. in terms of the game world's internal representation of morality, or from an "externalized" perspective, i.e. in terms of how the dilemma causes the player to reflect on moral issues in the real world (Heron and Belford, 2014b).

The position we argue in this paper is that the morality systems designed into role-playing games are a productive setting for investigating simulated

¹There are also tabletop and live-action role-playing games, but we limit ourselves here to the videogame genre, especially to the subset sometimes called computer role-playing games or CRPGs (Barton, 2008).

morality using multi-agent systems (MAS). We mean this in two directions: that RPGs are a promising testbed for MAS theories and architectures, and that RPGs can serve as a potential application domain for MAS research.

From the description above, it may even sound like RPGs essentially *already have* simulations of morality in artificial societies. A morality system plus a world populated by NPCs is not too far off the mark conceptually. However, in practice, RPGs and their morality systems are designed and implemented in quite a different manner from the way agents are modeled and studied in MAS research. Videogame designers approach the topic from a pragmatic perspective, since their goal is to make an entertaining and coherent experience, and are not necessarily focused on whether the simulation would make sense from a scientific or philosophical perspective.

As a result of game designers' understandable focus on experience design, NPCs are not usually implemented using agent models from artificial intelligence research, but in simpler architectures with a good deal more scope for manual specification and tweaking of behaviors. Moral dilemmas in particular are usually quite carefully scripted, set up by the game's narrative designer, using techniques such as explicit branching-narrative choice points. Dilemmas often do involve NPCs that could be seen as agents, however, and in some cases these agents have an interesting level of social simulation, especially simulation of features such as reputation, i.e. what beliefs NPCs hold about the player and how the player's actions affect those beliefs (Russell, 2006).

In relation to ethical theories, videogames offering moral choices are usually based on a short-term consequentialist approach: the moral alignment of the choices is clear in advance, and the consequences are foreseen and direct. However, and as Sicart (2013) points out, games such as *Fallout 3* often present the player with choices that have no clear good or bad options, and which often have unforeseeable consequences in the long term. In this sense, and quoting the definition of the *Fallout* series' "karma" measure in Multiple Authors (2005), the morality system in a game involving this kind of morally-grey choices measure "not only the effects of your actions but also your intentions". As a notorious example of a game based on a quite different approach, *Ultima IV* is based on virtue ethics; as pointed out by Heron and Belford (2014a), the game requires the player to get involved in moral reflection regarding their actions.

The modeling of ethical theories in artificial agents is key in the field of artificial morality, and Allen et al. (2005) provide an overview of differ-

ent approaches. Whereas consequentialist or deontological approaches seem to be a good fit for artificial moral agents (although not devoid of challenges), accounting for a Kantian or intentionalist approach faces the issue of accessing the agent's motives, which some authors argue that an artificial agent may not even have (Floridi and Sanders, 2004; Wallach et al., 2010). In contrast, Muntean and Howard (2014) suggest to build an artificial moral agent based on virtue ethics by using genetic algorithms.

It is possible to treat role-playing games more fully as multi-agent systems, viewing a game's NPCs as a group of simulated agents and the player as a participant in the agent society, along the lines of what Guyot and Honiden (2006) call multi-agent participatory simulations. Using this perspective, we propose a research path for scaling the agent-based study of moral systems to the kinds of dilemmas encountered in role-playing games, which we argue pose both an interesting challenge and promising domain for simulation of morality in artificial societies. To make our argument more concrete, we analyze the morality system implemented in the RPG *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* from a MAS perspective.

2 RELATED WORK

There is a good deal of related work in both multi-agent systems and games; we briefly summarize some of the most relevant here.

There are a number of general proposals for using games and game engines as test beds for multi-agent systems research in various ways (Kaminka et al., 2002; Bainbridge, 2007; Fabregues and Sierra, 2011; Koeman et al., 2018; Juliani et al., 2018), as well as more specific proposals arguing that role-playing games have useful design principles to offer (Barreteau et al., 2001; Guyot and Honiden, 2006).

One of the most relevant bodies of work on the MAS side is that which uses multi-agent systems as an empirical social-science tool to study *social dilemmas*, usually modeled by game-theory-style games such as the prisoner's dilemma (see Gotts et al., 2003, for an extensive survey). Social dilemmas need not necessarily have a moral interpretation, but often can easily be read in such terms. Work on the role of *norms* as a way of structuring behavior in agent societies approaches a similar problem with a different conceptual framework (Boella et al., 2006).

Social simulation research has also studied this issue, designing multi-agent systems to recreate and study the behavior of artificial societies formed by artificial agents. Different experiments study different

properties of such societies, such as the emergence of altruistic behavior. Surveying such research, one of the recommendations of Sullins (2005) is: “I think that the agent-based approach is the correct one but that the technology we have today is a bit too weak to simulate the evolution of morality in full. To achieve this goal will require software agents that have at least some cognitive capacities”.

Our proposal is that role-playing games as a challenge domain pose questions about how to scale up this type of multi-agent systems research to a setting that has features not found in simpler game-theoretic games and more “flat” simulations. For example: sequences of heterogeneous events over time, taking place in various locations with a variety of types of agents, situated within larger-scale narratives that structure behavior and interpretation of behavior. Nonetheless, RPGs do retain some advantages for computational investigation, since they are still self-contained virtual worlds.

From the game-research side, there is recent work on social-simulation systems for games, which aims to build frameworks in which games with multiple NPCs can be designed more heavily around simulation and agent-based (instead of scripted) ways of representing social interactions (McCoy et al., 2011; Samuel et al., 2015; Guimaraes et al., 2017). This work doesn’t usually frame itself as representing morality, but as with agent-based social-simulation work, such architectures are likely to be quite applicable to the case of morality systems as well.

3 GAMES AND ARTIFICIAL AGENTS

Following the line set by those previously cited works that push forward in the direction of considering virtual worlds in videogames as complex simulations, there are two main topics in which researchers in MAS could benefit from the latest advances in such games, as well as the other way around.

3.1 Dilemmas and Games

The field of game theory studies the behavior of multiple agents with regards to a set of decisions that often involve some notion of positive or negative pay-offs. Although these studies are meant to be used to predict the behavior that real-world agents would have in a similar situation, they often assume that the participants are perfect rational agents, meaning that their decisions will always correspond to their best possible choice in terms of outcomes; needless to say,

in real-world case scenarios the actual agents are often not as rational as one would like them to be, and the situations are often more complex and messier to model. Even though studies such as those of Baltag et al. (2009) aim to cover this gap, there is still a significant gap between realistic modeling of societies and game-theoretic social models.

In the case of the *prisoner’s dilemma*, the individually rational solution is to defect, even though it’s in the players’ overall best interests to cooperate. Some studies (Fehr and Fischbacher, 2003, e.g.) suggest that in the case of human agents there is in fact a bias towards cooperation. What makes this dilemma interesting in relation to videogames is that there is a set of titles belonging to the *Zero Escape* series (first developed by Spike Chunsoft, and later by Chime), such as *Zero Escape: Virtue’s Last Reward*, that include modified versions of the prisoner’s dilemma as one of the core mechanics of their gameplay.

When videogames have adapted the prisoner’s dilemma as a gameplay mechanic, their participants are explicitly not meant to be neutral, fully-rational agents, but rather complex characters with different personality traits, goals and motivations that greatly affect how the dilemma should be faced. In this case, the approach of such videogames to the classic dilemma opens up a new dimension that goes beyond the notions of rationality (in addition to being less symmetric, as agents are no longer assumed to be equivalent) and which demands a more “organic” approach that takes into account character traits, goals and moral values of the particular agents involved in it. These examples are based on scripted narratives and do not properly belong to the RPG genre, but they already begin to illustrate some of the features that videogame versions of moral dilemmas typically add, such as consideration of differing goals, values and characters’ relationships into any evaluation, and which may be of interest for research in MAS.

Along a similar line, experiments using the well-known *trolley problem* (as in Foot (1978), among many others), which is often framed as a dilemma for the utilitarian ethical system, suggests that rational notions of the greatest good for the greatest number are usually not enough to reach a consensus regarding the right choice. This particular dilemma has become particularly relevant lately due to the growing advancements in self-driving vehicles. Awad et al. (2018) conducted a survey study on a wide number of human participants to determine how the particularities of the agents involved in the dilemma affect the way people choose the preferred solution. The study illustrates how a great deal of factors, such as the age, gender, profession or background of the subjects in-

volved affect decisions. These effects, therefore, are not based on a rational, game-theoretic reasoning, but rather on other factors such as feelings, values and prejudices. Drawing an analogy with the prisoner's dilemma case, we argue that a study of such cases using simulations including deeper and more complex agents, such as those modeled in RPGs, can be beneficial for understanding all the dimensions involved in making a decision on this kind of scenario.

3.2 Artificial Societies and Games

A purpose of simulated artificial societies is to model fundamental qualities of living systems through computer models based on agents. These computer models can be used to study emergent behaviors among the agents inhabiting an artificial society. *Sugarscape*, for instance, was used to study the emergence of social groups through interactions between simple agents and their environment (Epstein and Axtell, 1996). Although this experiment starts with very simple grounding rules, the model showed the emergence of certain interesting behaviors, such as group migration behaviors, or the formation of different "tribes" that would compete for the dominance of particularly resource-rich areas.

Other models, such as the one created by Pepper and Smuts (2000), explore the emergence of altruistic behavior and group formation. Furthermore, the NEW TIES Project aimed to model an artificial environment in which artificial agents could evolve language, society and even some understanding of their own existence (Eiben et al., 2008). Although it was not intended in the project, Sullins (2005) argues that a complex model such as this one could be used to study the emergence of morality in a social environment.

The computational study of emergent behavior in social dynamics, nevertheless, often is based on simulating artificial societies formed by agents fulfilling a restricted set of roles—precisely because the interest in most of those works is to study the emergence of behaviors that are not initially modeled within the agents or the environment. Such restrictions, by design, do not account for more organic forms of social relationships, e.g., moral judgments, or even for the particular roles of certain agents in building and maintaining those artificial societies. These kind of relationships would need to take into account things such as the affinity that agents have towards each other, their unique attributes as individual agents, and the set of possible actions they can enact in their artificial society.

Conversely, videogames often present the player

with a highly interactive virtual world in which agents inhabiting them show compelling and complex behaviors and contribute towards depicting a believable human-like society, though these systems are often designed top-down rather than simulated bottom-up, i.e. with directly represented high-level structure instead of emergent structure. As the technologies behind games have grown more and more powerful, those virtual worlds have nonetheless begun to account for complex behaviors of their inhabitants such as their day and night schedules, needs (such as eating or sleeping), goals, and similar high-level features of human agency: some of those virtual worlds are populated by agents that wake up in the morning, eat, go to work, socialize in a tavern, go back to sleep and who, under certain conditions, may even decide to disobey the law in order to fulfill some of their needs (see "Responsibility" in Multiple Authors, 2008).

Even though any simulated aspects of virtual worlds in videogames aim, ultimately, at the entertainment of the player rather than at simulational fidelity, the level of detail in which their inhabitants are created represents a valuable step forward in terms of modeling agents that are part of a virtual society. Considering this, we argue that researchers in MAS can benefit from considering some of the richest cases of artificial societies currently existing in videogames and more specifically in some RPGs.

Titles based on a sandbox style of virtual world provide a bridge that is closer to MAS work, while illustrating some of the videogame features elaborated in RPGs. One well-known example is Lionhead's *Black & White* (Molyneux, 2001), which implements a simulation of moral choices and the emergence of moral values as the game's core mechanic. The player assumes the role of a god in a newly created world, populated initially by simple agents living in there. As a god, the player's influence over the world is mediated through the use of powers to shape the terrain or affect the weather as well as through a kind of emissary, which takes the form of a giant creature that also roams around the world. That creature has its own needs as well, and may decide, when it feels hungry, to eat one of the inhabitants from the world. As its master, the player can decide to either punish or reward such behavior, thus reinforcing the creature to do it again, or preventing it from repeating such action. The feedback given by the player contributes to the evolution not only of the moral profile of the emissary, but also of the way the inhabitants in the world are going to regard the player: if the player is helpful and kind, their inhabitants will pay their respects and love both the emissary and the player; if the player is a merciless, evil god, the inhabitants will fear them

both. In this case, both the emergence of a moral system in a particular agent (the emissary) and their effects on a society are the driving mechanics of the game, which reinforces the claim that, nowadays, certain open-world games depicting complex societies can be of great interest for the computational study of moral emergence.

Another example can be found in the game series *Creatures* by Mindscape Inc. (Grand and Cliff, 1998), where the player assumes a similar role to the god in *Black & White*, but selectively breeds creatures in a closed habitat, to foster certain traits. Similar to *Black & White*, creatures can be trained using reinforcement, but because there are multiple intelligent agents acting and interacting in *Creatures*, players can reward or punish social interaction between agents. *Creatures* moves closer to artificial life (ALife) simulation, as the game does not feature a story-driven plot, but acts more like a virtual fishtank or ant colony, where the player entertains him or herself through observing changes in the environment and agents.

The evolution of agents in games is limited, and the ways used to govern how agents behave varies; in the case of *Black & White*, the inhabitants are controlled by a scripted system, while the player's emissary is controlled by a neural network. For *Creatures*, the agents are controlled by a rule-based system and they evolve through breeding artificial chromosomes. Even if some features of these agents are restricted due to performance constraints for the game, we believe that, with relatively few additions, virtual worlds such as these may be useful to study the evolution of moral behaviors in an artificial society, and therefore we claim that this approach can lead to interesting contributions to both the MAS and the soft ALife fields. The best examples of fully realized morality systems in videogames, however, can be found in RPGs, which we'll turn to now.

4 CASE STUDY: OBLIVION

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (called just *Oblivion* henceforth) is a computer RPG that takes place within a richly simulated social and cultural world (Champion, 2009). Its social world simulation combined with frequent references to moral aspects of actions presents one of the more complex existing cases of a game morality system with a strong role for virtual agents in forming and enacting moral judgments. Figure 1 summarizes key elements of the game's morality system, which we've produced as part of a larger research project analyzing how dif-

ferent RPGs implement morality systems.²

Even though the game is still mainly focused on the players' experience, and so the Player Character (PC) takes a more relevant role in the model, we can see how the NPCs are still related through all other agents via a *Disposition* attribute that accounts for how their relationship is. This disposition, in case of the relationship between the PC and the NPCs, is affected by the overall measurement of the PC's "good" and "bad" deeds, which are represented through the *Fame* and *Infamy* properties. Aside from those, both the NPCs and the PC have different attributes detailing not only their physical and psychical strengths and weaknesses, but also detailing a set of skills in which they are proficient. This, in turn, determines what kind of activities each NPC can carry out in the game, and which it cannot. Furthermore, we can also see in the model how allegiance to certain factions or social groups is also taken into account when determining the affinity between agents.

One of the more unique features of the way *Oblivion* models NPCs, and which is particularly relevant when considering morality in artificial societies, is the attribute of *Responsibility*. In short, this attribute represents how the NPC feels towards the existing law in the virtual world. Unlike many other RPG games with complex NPCs, *Oblivion* goes one step beyond and allows NPCs with low responsibility to (non-scriptedly) choose goal achievement over lawfulness. For example, if an NPC has a low responsibility score, needs food, and currently lacks anything to eat, it may steal it from a market stall. This differs from many games, in which only the player and specifically scripted "evil" characters have the possibility to violate norms in a way that the in-game morality system would judge as a violation, which it a step closer towards a simulation of moral calculus and behavior in an agent society.

In fact, not only will NPCs in *Oblivion* make such decisions regardless of whether the player could notice the behavior or not, but if they do commit immoral acts, they risk facing the same consequences as the PC would, if they are caught while committing a crime by a guard or by another NPC. In particular, if the NPC is caught while committing a crime, the guards will give it a chance to pay a bounty; if the NPC cannot afford it (which it normally will not be able to), then the guards will execute the NPC. The NPC's responsibility is also taken into account when determining whether, when witnessing an illegal activity, one NPC will care enough to report the other one to the guards; NPCs with low responsibil-

²We've gathered some details of how *Oblivion* is implemented from the UESP wiki (Multiple Authors, 2008).

emergence of moral behaviors by MAS researchers, and to simulate worlds exhibiting a greater level of detail in terms of social dynamics for RPGs.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Role-playing games offer a novel view on artificial morality in simulated societies situated in rich environments. They often feature designed morality systems that have enough parallels to multi-agent systems work to make borrowing of techniques in both directions plausible (and, we argue, promising), but also differ in enough ways to pose research challenges. A few differences include the interplay of character-level simulation and god's-eye moral calculus, and especially the way that both of these simulated elements are combined with pre-scripted components and manually designed moral dilemmas that designers use to capture aspects that they find difficult to do through a fully agent-based approach. In general, one could characterize RPGs as a more heterogeneous and "messy" domain than those studied in scientific agent-based research. They therefore provide a complex and interesting challenge domain for research on multi-agent systems.

We have argued how cross-disciplinary research in the areas of MAS and artificial societies using RPGs can be greatly beneficial for future projects on morality, both when studied as particular dilemma-like cases and for their emergent behaviors in social simulations. MAS can benefit from the organic setting of dilemmas that videogames can offer; artificial society research can benefit from complex and more dynamic models of agents that are often depicted in RPGs. At the same time, the complex worlds and social settings simulated in RPGs can benefit from advances in modeling emergent social behaviors in artificial societies to achieve greater levels of immersion. Finally, we hope that our analysis of a particular case study, the morality system of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, has illustrated some possible directions for combining the kind of modeling and systems design done in RPGs with work in artificial societies.

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